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GEORGE HERBERT PALMER

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GEORGE HERBERT PALMER
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By Sidney A. Weston

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IN both the Old Testament and the New there is a climactic point; a passage, I mean, which so epitomizes all the teaching of that section of our Bible that we should be eager to save it were all else to be destroyed. In the Old Testament it is the Ten Commandments, which form a foundation for civil society. Society would go to pieces were not the Ten Commandments understood and usually obeyed. In the New Testament it is the Lord's Prayer, which lays foundations for the harmonious inner life as the Ten Commandments do for the outer. Here speaks the aspiring spirit to its Maker. This is the love-song of the Christian world. Few precepts of our Master, I suppose, have been more widely observed than that we are to "pray in this manner." For most of us that day would lack something in which the Lord's Prayer had not been

repeated. It fits all circumstances. It is the chant of the saint in his most exultant moments, his refuge and solace when most depressed. The poor sinner, who, through walking in the ways of vice has almost lost the power of aspiration and can no longer formulate for himself his better desires, finds in these sacred phrases his appropriate utterance.

Everywhere, indeed, the Prayer is used; and I believe we should be in error if we thought to disparage it by saying that, for the most part, it is repeated without our being distinctly aware of its meaning. In this I find no blame. It is a diseased and morbid condition of mind that seeks to be persistently conscious. Our home affections would not be the sweeteners of life that they are if we were asking ourselves perpetually "How much do I love these members of my household?" We preserve sanity best by taking our daily affections as matters of happy course. And just so it is in our ordinary repetitions of the Lord's Prayer. In the common

use of it we rise into a sacred atmosphere, where some one holier than we seems to be speaking for us. In its general meaning we partake, but we need not be anxious to search that meaning out. Still, I hold that it is incumbent upon us from time to time to evaluate our treasure. Every noble thing will bear close inspection. The more minutely it is examined, the more do its riches appear. Wisely does the Psalmist say, "The works of the Lord are great, sought out by all them that have pleasure therein."

I propose then in this paper to hold up the Lord's Prayer to the light and let the sunshine shimmer through it. Let us discern what lies hidden here. Let us, with no irreverent hand, dissect, analyze, become distinctly conscious of the beauty and power of blessing which the Prayer contains. Often has something like this been attempted before. Recognized for nearly two thousand years as an almost magic source of spiritual supply, it has gathered about itself a body of commen-

tary of every degree of worth—historical, textual, theological learning; sermonizing, acute or commonplace; and, best of all, the pathetic utterance by the lowly and unintelligent of thankfulness for benefits received. Though deriving much from the strong scholars and fervent devotees who have preceded me in telling what they have found in the Prayer, my aim is somewhat peculiar: I approach the Prayer as a lover of psychology and poetry no less than of religion, and would fix attention on some of its less noticed perfections as a work of art. In my judgment it is a masterpiece of literature, whose quality our translators have astonishingly preserved. Of course all good literature is something more than literature, which is merely a means for giving competent form to the dominant desires of man. The desires themselves are the stuff and substance. In making a literary survey of the Lord's Prayer we must accordingly ask how normal and formative are the desires here engaged, how exactly and simply are

they reported, and how well do they come together to form a thing of beauty, good for contemplation, good for stimulus.

As we thus approach the Prayer, certain general characteristics of it strike our attention; features of it, I mean, which concern its total structure and pervade it throughout.

In the first place, there is its social character. Its pronouns are *we*, *our*. They are not *I*, *my*. Usually religious emotion is individual—"The Lord is *my* Shepherd; *I* shall not want"; "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken *me*?" Here it is collective—"*Our* Father"; "Give us this day *our* daily bread." We are bidden to enter into our closet and to shut the door. Yes; but to take the interests of our fellow men in with us. No exclusive blessing is sanctioned. Our Lord seeks to bring all his children together as members of one family; if we are not prepared for this relationship, if we do not value the common love but care only for that which is bestowed on ourselves and shuts others

out, we had better cease the repetition of this Prayer.

Again, it is remarkable how in this Prayer the whole is in every part. Let one ask oneself what is its central petition? I have sometimes thought it was "Thy will be done." But is it, any more truly than "Forgive us our debts," "Hallowed be Thy name,"—than any one, indeed, of its many petitions? Each is all; all is in each.

But a peculiarity of it, which I think when it first catches our attention is somewhat forbidding, is its brevity. Here all spiritual life is supposed to be epitomized. Here are set forth the relations of our souls to God. Rightly we called this the love-song of the Christian world. And can no more be said than this? Is this brevity characteristic of love? Is it so that love utters itself elsewhere? And why be so poverty-stricken when we approach God? Does not love delight in exuberance, never satisfied, pouring itself out in continually fresh forms? The lover will not content himself with his lady's mere name; he

rings a dozen changes on it. He must embroider it all. He repeats his devotion over and over. There are not words enough to set forth his mistress' praises. And yet, when we come to God, a few sentences are counted enough. Is there not here a misunderstanding of love and its need? No! What I have said of the language of love is true, but it is true only of initial and astonished love, love that is unaccustomed to its object and fearful of itself. So speaks the lover who can hardly believe the great fact and is trying to reassure himself. There is a nobler love than that, and one which Jesus has sought to embody in his Prayer. It is the love of assurance. On such intimate terms with him do we live that it is merely the raising of the eye that is necessary, the uttering of a few words. He understands what we have need of before we ask him. All of us know that in this quietude lies the fulfillment of love, when it has escaped its hurry, its need of repetition, and dwells in assured peace with its great object.

But before proceeding further I think it important to observe that no fixed formula for praying is here offered, but only a type of the worshiper's inner attitudes, whatever his words may be. Central though the Prayer is in our Lord's teaching, as the Ten Commandments in the teaching of Moses, it cannot be taken as a formula, for it is never used again. No one who prays afterwards in the New Testament employs this form. We hear Jesus praying, but it is in other words than these. Stephen prays, Paul prays, but in phrases dictated by their immediate circumstances. No, it is not a formula. We are not bidden to confine our prayers to these particular words. It is a method. Indeed, it is impossible for us to employ it as a formula, for we really do not know what its words are. Though recorded twice, the accounts do not agree. In every sentence there are variations, and these by no means slight. Consider a few of them. In one or the other of its two statements, whole clauses are omitted. *Our*, at

the opening, is omitted. *Who art in heaven* is omitted. *Thy will be done* is omitted. *Deliver us from evil* is omitted, and all that follows is omitted.

Does this injure the Prayer? I think it enriches it; for, in reality, the Church, not knowing what the veritable words of the Master were, has joined with him in the construction of a prayer according to its own requirements. He set the pattern, suggested the manner, provided materials out of which a prayer might be framed. And then the Church, full of needs, saw in that material which he had left us the elements from which the Prayer was to be fashioned. It chose, accordingly, from his words, those which best fitted its necessities; and it added at the close a great clause of its own. As a result we have in this Prayer a sort of induction of the ages, experience after experience shaping appropriate expressions to meet daily needs. Led by our Master, we have gone on as fellow workers with him in the construction of a prayer.

And let it not for a moment be supposed that these additions and adjustments are merely the work of early ages. They have continued up to our time, for we use the Prayer in translation. It is a child's notion that in translation exactly the original is carried over uncolored and that the translator puts nothing of himself into his work. When precious things are handled, they are apt to bear the mark of him who has touched them. Our translators have observed this and have not hesitated to compensate for their touches by adding what is appropriate. It is often overlooked that they—yes, and the translators of some other languages, notably Luther in his superb German translation—have set the Prayer to a subtle rhythm. They have thrown it into verse; an iambic-anapestic rhythm has been made to palpitate throughout it. This will be caught more readily if we repeat the Prayer with undue emphasis on the marked syllables:

Our Fáther who árt in heáven,
Hállowed bé thy náme.
Thy kíngdom cóme. Thy wíll be dóne
On eárth as ít is in heáven.

Here is a veritable stanza, where short, sharp clause calls to clause. Through the whole Prayer, indeed, there is a graduated rhythmic echo. In the early part, relating especially to divine things, that rhythm is kept entire, measured, regular. But as we pass on into the entanglement of human needs, it becomes more broken; and finally, when we reach an experience essentially human, it goes over into plain prose; yet at the close, where the thought of God becomes again prominent, the full cadence returns:

Gíve us this dáy our daíly breád. And forgíve us our débts, as wé forgíve our débtors. And léad us nót into temptátion, but delíver ús from évil.

And then comes the closing rhythmic chant:

For thíne is the kíngdom,
And the pówer, and the glóry,
Forév̆er and éver. Amén.

How right, how subtly true were our translators, how responsive to human requirement, when they gave so suitable a setting to their Prayer! For everywhere aspiration claims rhythm. In rhythm must be expressed our deepest emotions and the utterances of the will. Prose is left to describe what we observe; it expresses fact. Rhythm expresses hope. Accordingly, our translators, understanding the human mind with delicacy, have given to this document that form in which it seems simplest to us, most natural, least disturbed. Unfortunately those who prepared the English liturgy had no such fineness of ear, and clumsily substituted for the rhythmic word "debts" the unmanageable "trespasses," a word which does not occur in either of the two forms of the Prayer.

This then is the Prayer which we are to examine, this composite Prayer, as we have it today in its marvelously appropriate form. And, scrutinizing it, we see that it falls into four parts: Here is the hush before prayer; then our service of God, what we bring to him; third, his service of us, what he alone can bring; and, last of all, our rest in him, our confidence. Let us devote a few words to each.

I venture to call the opening clause, *Our Father who art in heaven,* the hush before prayer. As we come into that august presence, we bow our heads. He is high and lifted up. He is not to be identified with the actualities and tawdry affairs of our world. He is in the heavens, and we are among the limitations of earth. And yet, his kin we are. There is nothing in his nature which we should not aspire to possess. *Our Father.* He who identifies himself with another expresses love, and this is the opening thought of the prayer—love and awe. They should always go to-

gether. Certainly either, disjoined from the other, would wreck the Prayer.

In that great hush, then, where we know our love and so press forward, where we know his exaltation and so bow our heads, our Prayer opens. But in every nation prayer has been connected with sacrifice. He who prays brings an offering. Primarily, prayer is giving. The worshiper bestows gifts on him to whom he comes. And how could it be otherwise? Is it not of the very nature of love to give? Have we ever loved any one on whom we did not wish to bestow? The thought of the loved one inevitably brings a desire to spend oneself for his enrichment. Accordingly, the first section of the body of the Prayer is devoted to our service of God; for it has ever been a true thought that prayer is sacrificial. The heathen brings a heifer from his herd. We no less come bringing gifts; but, like all in Christianity, these must be of a spiritual kind. We search, therefore, after what is most precious to our own hearts, and come of-

fering these things to God. And what are they? They are threefold:

Hallowed be Thy name. Our standard of worth shall be found in him. Nothing that is not of his nature shall be accounted precious in our sight. Tempted we are continually to call gold of value, to call pleasures delightful, to count our mere continuance in life as something to be sought. All this we sweep away in our first sacrificial offering. *Hallowed be* Thy *name.* All things to us shall be precious according as they bear his mark.

Thy kingdom come. What we bring to God shall be no random aspiration. Life shall be organized after his pattern. Our devotion shall be systematic. A very kingdom shall be erected to him by our endeavors. Good deeds shall match with good deeds, and all be builded up into a suitable place for him to dwell in.

Thy will be done. That is the heart of the matter, and perhaps the hardest of all. We will give up, we promise, our very selves. We come bringing in our sacrificing

hands our own will, preferring that his will shall take its place.

Such are the gifts we bring to God, the greatest gifts any one can bestow. And all of them we give without limitation of amount; for, by an interjected clause, we declare we will not rest till earthly offerings attain a heavenly perfection.

But love is always reciprocal. The third section of the Prayer names gifts we desire from God. It is often said that petitionary prayer is a mockery. It has only a reflex influence, working its effects merely on him who prays. It may mellow our nature, exalt our ideals, render a rebellious heart submissive, but it can operate no change in God or outward nature. Strictly speaking, prayer is always addressed to ourselves, as a species of self-communion. God will of himself give us what we need. It is impious and useless to instruct him what that shall be. Such thoughts receive no sanction from the Lord's Prayer. It is frankly petitionary. It asks. It announces homely needs and

believes God's love is adequate to meet them. How faulty it would be were such confidence omitted! It is a fantastic notion that love simply bestows. No! It is a large receiver, ever two-sided, refusing to make distinction between that which it gives and that which it gets. Between those who love, a frank expression of desire is natural, and readiness to give is largely influenced by readiness to receive. The wisest father listens tenderly to the immature requests of his child and allows them to affect his subsequent action. In accordance, therefore, with the psychology of love, ample room is provided in the Lord's Prayer for petitions. Those petitions, indeed, cover the entirety of human life. They are naturally threefold; they refer to the present, to the past, to the future.

Give us this day our daily bread. This relates to the present; and, because the present is essentially transient, with nothing abiding in it, what we pray for is also ephemeral. It is the supply of these

decaying bodies, the reasonable thing to think of in any present instant; that is all.

In *Forgive us our debts*, we frame a petition with reference to the past. It would at first seem that praying for the past is folly. The past cannot be changed. Why then have wishes about it? There is only one sort of wish which is appropriate, and that a sad one—when we perceive its misuse, and become aware how in the past we have done something which hampers the present and the future. If we were not sinners, we could bid the past go its way, setting our faces entirely toward the future; but we have tied ourselves up in iniquity and are compelled to carry the burden of the past with us. Therefore, in approaching God, we acknowledge this and ask that that past may interfere the least possible with further righteousness.

But such forgiveness is conditional. It occurs only when we too are able to forgive. For many the condition is a stumbling-block. I have known those who hesitated to repeat the Prayer on account of

this appalling clause. What if we should be taken at our word and be forgiven only to the degree in which we ourselves forgive! For forgiveness goes against our natural instincts and its very possibility may be doubted. Can I truthfully count him just who has treated me unjustly? So deep are these difficulties that on this clause alone does Jesus offer comment—a comment, however, which merely generalizes the trouble, reiterates, and does not explain it. With an imaginative "for" taking up the unspoken perplexity of his hearers, he declines to analyze the enigma of undeserved love. "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."

But as regards the future? Recognizing the lessons of the past, and understanding that our chief solicitude for what is to come should be that we be not through inevitable weakness liable again to such wrongdoing as now pursues us, we put a kind of terror also into our last petition: *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

I have said that there is no sign that the thought of Jesus passed beyond this point. But the Church was not contented to pause here. It added what I have called the closing chant. And this was necessary; for, after we have brought our gifts to God and have asked his for ourselves, we need to be assured that these will certainly be ours. Such certitude the Church finds in the fact that our petitions are rooted in his nature. *For thine is the kingdom.* That kingdom is no arbitrary matter, waiting to be constructed by ourselves alone. There is an eternal groundwork already laid. It is as when I come to my father and say "Let me be thy son, for thy son I am." I rely on a fixed fact as my ground of confidence in his love. Just so is God's kingdom fixed. Ours it is to comprehend it, to bring out its earthly significance—not to create it.

Here, then, in this closing portion the Church expresses its assurance of prayer answered. *For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory.* And let it be noticed

that in doing so it returns to those sacrificial gifts which it has already brought. *Thine is the kingdom.* We have prayed that his kingdom might come, we have promised it to God; and now we know that he assures it to us. *Thine is the kingdom and the power;* so we said, *Thy will be done. And the glory;* yes, that was our first thought, *Hallowed be thy name.* At the close of the Prayer we take up again the original theme or dominant note, as in a piece of music. This thought of the abiding character of that which love both gives and receives swells the massive music of the final clause. It is something properly uttered not by the Master but by ourselves.

I said at the beginning that this Prayer, far from being a formula, is a type. I meant that in it the necessary elements of all prayer are set forth. And these are they: The hush before prayer, our gifts to God, his gifts to us, assurance, rest in him. Strike out these, one after the other, and see how prayer is maimed. Strike out the

first; you have the hasty and irreverent prayer. Strike out the second; you have the selfish, the greedy, prayer. Strike out the third; you have the adulatory and artificial prayer. Strike out the fourth; you have the anxious and hesitating prayer. Only when all are in some degree present can prayer reach its proper beauty as the natural expression of an exalted, generous, needy, and quiet soul.

"After this manner therefore pray *ye*."

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